DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 327 RC 014 926

TITLE Living Away from Home Facilities for Isolated Children. Document 78. A Look at Recent Documents of Educational Significance.

INSTITUTION Australian Commonwealth Schools Commission, Canberra.; Queensland Dept. of Education, Brisbane (Australia).

PUB DATE Dec 83
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Boarding Schools; Categorical Aid; Elementary Secondary Education; *Facility Improvement; Foreign Countries; *Living Standards; Migrant Education; Private Schools; Resident Advisers; Residential Care; Rural Areas; Rural Education; *Rural Youth; *Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS *Australia; Government Schools (Australia); Government Subsidies; *Hostels; Isolation (Geographic)

ABSTRACT

The first national study of facilities for isolated Australian children living away from home was undertaken by the Commonwealth Schools Commission in 1981 and released in 1983. This document contains the conclusions, findings, and recommendations of the Commonwealth Schools Commission Working Party report. The results prompted the Commission to recommend a new joint program of $7.5 million a year for three years to help with the construction, upgrading, and replacement of facilities. The Commission also recommended an amendment to the States Grants (Schools Assistance) Act to permit student hostels to receive capital and special-purpose funds for facilities for isolated students. The study included all non-profit boarding schools and student hostels providing accommodations for students attending regular schools for tuition. The study revealed major deficiencies requiring immediate attention. The most urgent needs included the maintenance and upgrading of buildings, greater provision of indoor recreation facilities and study areas, and improved staff accommodation facilities to attract and keep reliable supervisory staff. The conclusions and recommendations are particularly relevant for Queensland, where families living in rural and isolated areas often face problems of educational disadvantage caused by lack of, or inadequate access to, learning opportunities and facilities. (BRR)

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ED252327

DOCUMENT 78

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A LOOK AT RECENT DOCUMENTS
OF EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

Information and Publications Branch
Department of Education Queensland

LIVING AWAY FROM HOME FACILITIES FOR ISOLATED CHILDREN

Commonwealth Schools Commission (Report of the Working Party, Monica Miland, Chairperson), *Study of Living Away from Home Facilities for Isolated Children*, Canberra, 1982.

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LIVING AWAY FROM HOME FACILITIES FOR ISOLATED CHILDREN

Commonwealth Schools Commission (Report of the Working Party, Monica Miland, Chairperson), *Study of Living Away from Home Facilities for Isolated Children*, Canberra, 1982.

This first national study of current facilities for isolated children living away from home was undertaken by a Working Party established by the Commonwealth Schools Commission in November 1981. It included all non-profit boarding schools and student hostels providing accommodation for students attending regular schools for tuition.

Released by the Commission in May 1983, the Report provides a comprehensive analysis of the scale and quality of provisions and emerging needs on a national basis. Its conclusions and recommendations are particularly relevant for Queensland, where families living in rural and isolated areas often face problems of educational disadvantage caused by lack of or inadequate access to learning opportunities and facilities.

The study revealed major deficiencies which the Working Party believes require immediate attention if isolated students are to have reasonable access to an adequate range of educational opportunities. The most urgent needs include the maintenance and upgrading of buildings, greater provision of indoor recreation facilities and study areas, and improved staff accommodation facilities to attract and keep reliable supervisory staff.

Findings of the study have prompted the Commission to recommend a new joint program of $7.5 million a year for three years to help with the construction, upgrading and replacement of facilities. It has also recommended an amendment to the *States Grants (Schools Assistance) Act* to permit student hostels to receive capital and special-purpose funds for facilities for isolated students.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

In conducting its study of the provision of living away from home facilities for isolated students, the Working Party was required to:

- define the types of accommodation which are provided for students in boarding schools and hostels;
- review existing funding arrangements and make recommendations concerning further Commonwealth funding;
- determine the need for student accommodation in Government and non-Government student hostels and boarding schools;
- establish priorities for funding among various types of facilities and regional needs for hostels and boarding schools;
- recommend ways in which Commonwealth programs administered by the Commission may be amended to better meet the needs of living away from home facilities for isolated children;
- produce a list of student hostels and boarding schools which details student numbers, recreation facilities and current operating surplus or deficit;
- identify related issues requiring further study.

The study was to include all boarding schools and student hostels which are run for the sole or main purpose of providing accommodation for students attending regular schools for tuition and which are non-profit making organisations. It excluded accommodation provided for children attending special schools, children under special custodial or welfare care and accommodation provided in private homes or second homes for isolated children.

THE REPORT

The Report consists of seven chapters and 14 appendixes.

Chapter 1 identifies levels of demand and major priorities for assistance to boarding schools and student hostels through State and federal funding and programs, and briefly traces the background of the study. Chapter 2 reviews important reports on the provision of educational facilities for isolated children, published during 1975–81.

The recommendations and views contained in submissions to the Working Party from community groups, education authorities, parent associations, church organisations and individuals are summarised in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 analyses responses to the survey questionnaire sent to Government and non-Government boarding schools and student hostels throughout Australia; and Chapter 5 outlines matters identified during Working Party members' visits to a representative sample of the institutions.

Chapter 6 presents the Working Party's conclusions and findings, based on the statistical and descriptive data obtained during the study. These form the basis of its recommendations, set down in Chapter 7 under the categories General, New Program, Existing Program and Future National Co-operative Studies.

The appendixes contain the survey instrument, statistical tables and relevant organisational information.

EXTRACTS FROM THE REPORT

This issue of *Document* contains the conclusions, findings, and recommendations of the Working Party.

Conclusions

There have been concerted efforts on the part of education authorities over recent years to improve and extend educational services in rural areas. This has lessened the need for children to move away from home for educational purposes.

Nonetheless there remain some children for whom reasonable educational services cannot yet be provided close to their homes but who can receive such provision if adequate access to living away from home facilities – boarding schools, hostels, cottage homes, private board and second homes – is available.

Boarding schools – both Government and non-Government – provide for the accommodation needs of the major proportion of isolated students who live away from home to complete their schooling. The majority of the students attend non-Government boarding schools [see Table 6.1 of the Report].

Some isolated students, however, cannot take advantage of such facilities for a variety of reasons such as costs involved and the limited provision of places.

Hostels do cater for many but cannot cater for all such students due, in the main, to the lack of secure funding arrangements.

Boarding Schools

While the majority of students attend boarding schools through choice rather than because of geographic isolation, the adequate provision of educational services for children in isolated areas demands a continuation of boarding school accommodation.

Some parents see boarding schools as providing opportunities for learning, for challenge, for heightened aspirations, for spiritual guidance and for all-round opportunity not perceived to be available in the local area.

It is for these reasons that some parents select boarding schools for their children's education. The extent to which such parents can continue to take up this option would depend on a number of factors:

- stability in boarding school fees
- maintenance, at least, of the present level of boarding school places for boys and girls
- continuing financial support at realistic levels by Commonwealth and State authorities for children who live in isolated areas
- control of the numbers of overseas students (Years 7–12) gaining placement in Australian boarding schools
- availability of appropriate staff, religious and lay, to provide the necessary levels of pastoral and supervisory care.

The decision to maintain or close boarding facilities is receiving continuing attention by boarding school authorities and religious orders. The costs of maintaining the boarding section are such that supplementation from the tuition fees received from both day pupils and boarders is often required.

The viability of boarding schools, however, has been challenged in recent years. Susceptible to fluctuations in the rural sector, many boarding schools have rationalised the number of boarding places available and closed off sections not required.

The difficulty of attracting and retaining appropriate supervisory staff for boarding schools has exacerbated this trend. The decline in number of religious staff in low fee boarding schools has added to the difficulty, particularly in girls schools. In many cases the accommodation provided in the past for religious supervisory staff is not suitable for lay supervisory staff who are replacing them.

The cost of upgrading and refurbishing staff accommodation both in religious and lay-run establishments continues to increase more quickly than other costs. School councils and systems authorities have looked, and will continue to look, at the cost effectiveness of maintaining boarding establishments, particularly in the context of:

- increasing salaries
- difficulty of attracting staff
- increasing expectations of accommodation provision both for students and staff
- spiralling maintenance costs, particularly for buildings erected many years ago.

There is some evidence of the increasing difficulty for many students from isolated areas, particularly for Year 11 and 12 students, in securing a place at a boarding school. This indicates that present facilities are operating very close to full capacity. There is some concern at the possibility of boarding schools becoming more selective in their admission policies or less likely to resist pressure to increase boarding fees.

Some schools may choose to increase fees to offset the problem of rising costs. A major effect of such a decision would be to put such facilities beyond the reach of many isolated families who are currently able to afford the costs involved.

Nonetheless many schools already have as policy some preference for children from isolated areas because their needs are seen to be more urgent than those of other students.

It is apparent that the viability of boarding schools, and consequent provision of places for isolated children, depends largely on continuing support from students who have access to day schools but whose parents choose to send them to boarding school. There is, however, a number of boarding schools in Australia which cater mainly for isolated children. Cost pressures from a fluctuating rural economy may cause some schools to broaden the base of their boarding population to ensure viability, with a consequent loss of places for children from isolated areas.

Government boarding schools are operated in New South Wales, Western Australia and Northern Territory. The New South Wales and Western Australian boarding schools were established to provide comprehensive agricultural courses for boys on a Statewide basis. One in New South Wales has since become co-educational. The Northern Territory operates two co-educational boarding schools for Aboriginal students. The quality of care and the ethos of the schools are highly regarded.

Government boarding schools do not always have the economic problems experienced by many non-Government boarding schools. All boarding schools, however, face difficulties concerning costs associated with maintenance and upgrading of facilities.

Increasingly, parents are looking for further provision of boarding places – in Government and non-Government schools – for secondary students in regional centres. The quality of pastoral care, the extension of students' aspirations, the ethos that permeates boarding school activities and the social and cultural provisions are seen as highly desirable by many parents.

Hostels

Hostels can fulfil an important need in rural communities. Though limited in number, hostels provide accommodation for students to attend schools mainly in rural centres.

The level of support given by State authorities for student hostels is a major determinant of the viability of the hostels and the level of pastoral care which they can provide.

In Western Australia and Tasmania, hostels are administered by boards of management which function within agreed guidelines. The State authorities finance support programs which enable reasonable levels of provision to be made available for isolated children.

There are no student hostels in Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Captial Territory.

In the remaining States and the Northern Territory, student hostels are operated by local authorities or private bodies. Government authorities provide varying degrees of assistance for these hostels but generally such assistance is not sufficient to ensure their long-term viability, nor an adequate level of pastoral care.

Among students who use hostels are those who find the daily travel by school charter bus tiring and unproductive. Students can spend as much as three or four hours a day travelling to and from school. Upgraded roads and well-sprung buses cannot overcome fully the fatigue factor involved, particularly the cumulative effects on children.

Hostels allow students from isolated areas to attend schools, to participate in extracurricular activities, to avoid fatigue caused by daily bus travel and in many cases to travel home for weekends. Hostels can provide companionship of peers and access to shared learning experiences not available through correspondence courses. Hostels do provide an important service for those children who need to attend school in a larger centre than their home community, which may be small, such as a family on a property, or an Aboriginal or Islander community.

The provision of suitable supervisory staff able to provide an acceptable standard of pastoral care, supervision and discipline is important in any successful hostel operation. Hostels rely on dedicated people who are prepared to work long hours to provide for the needs of students.

Since hostels tend to have fees set at a level which would ensure that children of families on low to moderate incomes are able to meet the fees and associated costs, the amount of money available for staff salaries is limited. These cost pressures often result in small hostels, particularly five-day hostels, being run by one person without any other assistance.

The low fees charged of hostel students have meant an inability to accumulate the necessary resources to carry out maintenance, refurbishing and upgrading of facilities. As the environment becomes less attractive, parents have frequently declined to use a hostel, sending the children to boarding school or making other arrangements such as private board or setting up a second home in town.

In addition, some parents have expressed concern that their children might be limited in their relationships with others because of the small numbers of children at the local school.

The relationship between the local school and a hostel is of major importance. Parental decision to send their children to a hostel reflects their perception of the quality of the learning experience at the school, the subject choice available, standards and discipline, together with particular concern for the tone of the school, quality of care shown to hostel children and suitability of staff.

Consideration of those hostels which have proved to be successful indicates the existence of satisfactory levels of funding including provision of adequate staff levels and financial support for other recurrent costs, maintenance, and capital works. The necessary characteristics of successful hostels include:

- levels of staffing which allow for appropriate pastoral care and structured study and homework sessions;

- the co-operation of principals and staff who are sensitive to the tenuous links between the local school and its community and are conscious of the needs of students who live in the hostel;
- levels of accommodation appropriate to the age of students, with single rooms or cubicles for senior students;
- recreational programs after school hours and weekend activity with access to appropriate indoor and outdoor recreational facilities.

Findings

The study has collected a considerable amount of data from a wide range of sources including responses to questionnaires; interviews with parents, interest groups and education authorities; submissions forwarded to the Commission; and reports of other studies published during the last ten years.

Evaluation of the data has revealed general agreement. The main issues which need to be addressed so that isolated children might have reasonable access to an appropriate range of educational opportunities are:

(i) the continuing long-term needs of isolated children for proper access to educational services through home-based education and school-based services in local rural centres and larger, often urban, centres;

(ii) the provision of appropriate standards of accommodation, pastoral care and supervision in living away from home facilities for isolated children;

(iii) the continuation by education authorities of present policies to improve educational services for rural and isolated communities;

(iv) the financial implications for parents in isolated areas of educating their children away from home, in terms of both financial hardship and limitations on the type of educational service selected for their children arising from boarding and associated costs;

(v) the regular review of the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) grants scheme to ensure maintenance of appropriate funding levels and the regular review of criteria for access to additional grants;

(vi) the demand from overseas students for places in the context of the already limited number available in boarding schools;

(vii) the co-ordination of educational provision for children of itinerant families;

(viii) the increased provision of services and resources to meet the needs of particular groups of students in isolated areas, such as handicapped children.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings of the study and in the context of the Commission's charter, the Working Party recommends:

General

(i) That the right of children who live in rural and isolated areas to have reasonable access to an adequate range of educational opportunities should be recognised and facilitated.

(ii) That the *States Grant (Schools Assistance) Act* should be amended to permit student hostels to receive capital and special-purpose funds for projects which assist in the provision of living away from home facilities and services for isolated children.

New Program

(i) That a new joint capital grants program, called the Living Away from Home Facilities Program, should be established to provide assistance for the upgrading of accommodation for isolated children who need to live away from home to attend Government and non-Government schools. The aim of the program should be to alleviate the major deficiencies, found during this study, in the provision of basic accommodation facilities for isolated children. The program should be administered on a national basis by the Commission with the aid of State education authorities and the Commission's Planning and Finance Committees. It should take account of demographic differences and variations in current levels of provision of residential facilities and funding for isolated students.

(ii) That the program should be established as a short-term measure to meet the most pressing needs of isolated students accommodated in student hostels and boarding schools. The program should be reviewed after three years in the light of the results of proposed consultations between the Commonwealth and the States concerning the provision of education services in rural areas.

(iii) That projects eligible for grants under this program should involve:
- the renovation and upgrading of existing facilities in hostels and boarding schools;
- the provision of new facilities in hostels and boarding schools to reduce overcrowding in dormitories, to provide indoor and outdoor recreation facilities and to provide accommodation for supervisory staff;
- the renting of premises for use as hostels.

(iv) That the program should have two elements: one for student hostels and another for Government and non-Government boarding schools.

(v) That the program element for student hostels should be funded at a level of $2 500 000 per year at December 1982 prices, and should be administered in co-operation with State education authorities who will have initial responsibility for making recommendations, in the context of Commission guidelines, concerning priorities, project funding levels and appropriate subvention levels.

(vi) That the program element for boarding schools should be funded at a level of $5 000 000 per year at December 1982 prices and should be administered with the assistance of State education authorities, for Government boarding schools, and the Commission's State Planning and Finance Committees, for non-Government boarding schools,

which will have initial responsibility for setting priorities, project funding levels and appropriate subvention levels.

Existing Program

(i) That the Non-Government Schools Capital Grants Program should continue to have a responsibility to allocate funds for accommodation facilities in non-Government schools. This would enable the proposed short-term upgrading program for boarding schools to reduce the serious backlog of renovation and maintenance work and to make other urgently needed provisions.

(ii) That the guidelines for implementation of the Commission's programs in 1983 and 1984 should identify as a priority the needs of children in isolated areas and those who have responsibility for their education.

(iii) That the Professional Development Program should consider courses in supervision, counselling and management for staff involved in hostels and boarding schools; courses for teachers in rural schools to acquaint them with the educational experience of children on Correspondence and School of the Air programs and to assist these children in transition from home-based to school-based education; education centres, where appropriate, should be encouraged to provide opportunities for local communities to discuss the needs of all children in rural schools.

(iv) That the Country Areas Program should review approaches taken to ensure that the needs of isolated children attending local schools and living in hostels are made an important focus of the program. The relationship of correspondence schools to the Country Areas Program should also be examined.

(v) That the Special Education Program should examine means whereby, where appropriate, increased numbers of isolated children who are handicapped may attend the local school rather than schools in urban centres.

Future National Co-operative Studies

(i) That the Commonwealth and the States should review current State travel allowances with the aim of putting them on a common basis and investigate the need for additional funds for travel subsidies.

(ii) That the Commonwealth and the States should conduct a national study of the provision of educational services in rural areas and for isolated children, including the provision of boarding facilities.

(iii) That the Commission should establish with the States and Territories a co-operative study of the potential benefits of a national approach to the development of curriculum material for correspondence schools, including a technological approach to the provision of educational services for isolated children and rural schools with limited educational opportunities. Such a study should take account of the results of other relevant studies.

(iv) That the Commission, in consultation with the States and Territories, should investigate the means by which educational provision for the children of itinerant parents may best be improved.